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H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Introduction: Themes and Hypotheses

We can define the Freedom Trail in New York State as “the efforts of peoples of African descent held as slaves to escape, with or without assistance, from the earliest decades of the colonial New York experience until the passage of the 13th Amendment, prohibiting slavery in the United States, in 1865.”

Our current knowledge of this movement is only in its infancy, but we are beginning to develop some hypotheses that might guide future research:

1. Fugitives

- a. The freedom trail began when people in slavery took their lives into their own hands and decided to leave.
- b. Traveling the freedom trail was often extremely dangerous for fugitives.
- c. Fugitives who reached central New York were often women and children as well as men.
- d. Fugitives remained at risk even after they had lived in freedom for several years. Kidnapping remained a persistent fear, even years after their journey, for fugitives who settled in central New York,

2. Routes

- a. The freedom trail was not literally an underground movement and rarely involved actual tunnels.
- b. Fugitives used different kinds of routes, including land routes (paths, roads, and railroads) and water routes (creeks, rivers, canals, lakes).
- c. Safe houses often had access to more than one route. Fugitives used some routes and way stations more consistently than others.

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3. Organization

- a. In certain areas, African Americans operated the primary way stations. In other areas, European Americans were the most common operators. Both regionally and locally, however, most underground railroad networks incorporated both blacks and whites.
- b. Women as well as men worked in the underground railroad network. While men were most visible in terms of finding and transporting fugitives, women almost certainly provided assistance when fugitives reached their household. In addition, many African Americans in the network were themselves fugitives.
- c. Among African Americans, barbers, hotel workers, and those associated with waterfront activities (including canal lock operators, sailors, cooks on steamboats, laborers, cart men, and porters) seem to have been key network supporters.
- d. Underground railroad networks were often organized around family and church groups. Among African Americans, AME and AME Zion churches were prominent. Among European Americans, Congregationalists (and sometimes Presbyterians), Methodists, Wesleyan Methodists, Christian Union groups, and some Baptists and Quakers were often involved.
- e. Underground railroad activists were not defined by class or economic status but by a common commitment to equality and respect for all people. Safe houses reflect a wide disparity in wealth, but most were small vernacular buildings, very much like those of their neighbors.
- f. Well-organized abolitionist groups often sustained freedom trail supporters, both locally and statewide.
- g. Freedom trail work was sometimes well organized but sometimes haphazard. In some places and times, for example, fugitives received clear directions to the next station. Sometimes, they found their way with little help.
- h. Underground railroad supporters in villages often played different roles than did those on farms. Villagers may have been more active in networking, but they often sent fugitives to outlying farms for hiding.
- i. Underground railroad activity, while always discreet, was relatively more open in the 1830s and 1840s than in the five years following passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. By the mid-1850s, however, fugitives felt increasingly safe in many central New York communities.

4. Material Culture

- a. In general, buildings used by African Americans are not distinguishable in form and detail from those used by European Americans.
- b. In some cases, house construction and form may reflect traditions from various culture hearths. When houses inhabited by African Americans were actually built by African Americans, for example, they may have been constructed with one or more twelve by twelve foot squares, perhaps reflecting West African traditions, as James Deetz found in his study of Parting Ways in his book, In Small Things Forgotten. Likewise, houses built

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by European Americans from different culture hearths may show forms that reflect these traditions. In central New York, these were principally New England, southeastern Pennsylvania, and sometimes eastern New York (especially Dutch).

- c. In general, buildings used by abolitionists and underground railroad activists are not distinguishable from buildings constructed and used by non-abolitionists. They do not generally have tunnels, hidey-holes, trap doors, hidden staircases, or other features built especially to hide freedom seekers.
- d. In general, furnishings, tools, and other remains of daily life were similar for abolitionist and non-abolitionist families and for European Americans and African Americans. Exceptions may have occurred in objects associated with the use of slave-grown products (abolitionist families often eschewed the use of sugar and cotton, for example), in objects specifically designed to reflect abolitionist values (such as china sold through abolitionist newspapers in 1838 to commemorate the murder of Elijah Lovejoy), or in objects that reflect occupations that were traditionally African American (such as barber tools).

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5. Results

- a. Many fugitives settled in Canada. Many settled in northern communities on the U.S. side of the border, including central New York.
- b. Those who settled in central New York often chose communities where a significant number of African Americans, many of them born in New York State, already lived.
- c. Within those communities, whether rural or urban, African Americans usually lived in ethnically and racially mixed neighborhoods, but they were also involved with local African American families, churches, and political movements.
- d. Personal testimony of fugitives was a powerful influence in recruiting local European
- e. American support for abolitionism.
- f. Tension between North and South over the perceived success of the underground railroad was one factor that led to the Civil War.

We can identify sites associated with the Freedom Trail by their well-documented association with people involved in the underground railroad. Oral tradition offers us clues. Written primary sources help us recapture evidence that has been lost to the oral tradition. Based on this review of the Freedom Trail, the abolitionist movement, and African American community development in central New York, we expect that such well-documented sites will be numerous indeed.

Methodology

This Multiple Property Nomination is meant to be open-ended, with new properties nominated as they are identified. Existing survey work varies in detail, from a fairly thorough survey in Oswego County to sketchy surveys based on printed sources, oral traditions, and scattered manuscript material in other parts of the region. A series of sites have already been listed on the National Register and/or as National Landmarks that acknowledge an abolitionist connection. Among them are the Gerrit Smith Estate in Peterboro, the Harriet Tubman Home in Auburn and related properties, and the Plymouth Congregational Church in Syracuse. Other sites currently listed on the National Register also have an identification with the underground railroad, abolitionism, or African American life.

Although still incomplete, the Oswego County survey is the most detailed. Because so much misinformation exists about the Freedom Trail, the Oswego County project emphasized careful research from a variety of primary sources. Funded by the National Park Service in 1998, this survey was carried out under the auspices of the Oswego County Freedom Trail Commission (which includes representatives from several local historical agencies—the Heritage Foundation of Oswego, the H. Lee White Marine Museum, the Oswego County Genealogical Society, the Oswego County Historical Society, and the Oswego County Historian's Office—as well as from the State University of New York at Oswego, the Oswego County Tourism Office, and the Oswego County Legislature. Many local volunteers and students from throughout the County worked on this project. In particular, Eleanor Cali, Charlene Cole, and George Wise worked for many months on several different sites. Based on this research and on her own work as well, Helen Breitbeck of the Heritage Foundation of Oswego prepared blue forms for fourteen Freedom Trail sites as part of this initial survey.

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The survey proceeded in four steps: surveying, researching, rating, and nominating. (For a more complete description of this process, see Wellman, "Researching the Underground Railroad in Central New York," (http://www.oswego.edu/Acad_Dept/a_and_s/history/ugrr/).

6. Surveying. The initial survey involved a review of:
 - a. oral sources. Although often unreliable, oral traditions and oral histories provide significant clues to possible underground railroad sites. We collected as many local stories as possible.
 - b. local histories. Several articles appeared in local and state publications in the twentieth century. Many of these were compilations of oral traditions. A few, however (including a speech given to the DAR in 1907), reflected personal memories.
 - c. general histories of the underground railroad. Wilbur Siebert's 1898 history yielded eight possible underground railroad supports in Oswego County. Other local and regional printed sources suggested a few more.
 - d. federal and state censuses. For possible freedom seekers themselves, we checked the federal and state censuses for 1850, 1855, and 1860 for the City of Oswego. Of the 93 African American residents in Oswego in 1850, 42.6% of those age 15 or older listed their birthplaces as a slave state or Canada. Of the 134 African Americans in Oswego in 1855, 30.9% of those over age 15 listed their birthplaces as a slave state or Canada. Although incomplete, this initial survey revealed dozens of possible sites associated with the Freedom Trail in Oswego County.

7. Researching. Of these many possibilities, Helen Breitbeck of the Heritage Foundation and volunteers from throughout the county began to do further research on selected people and sites. Much of this material is available in notebooks prepared by the Oswego County Freedom Trail Commission and distributed to libraries throughout Oswego County, to the main branch of the Onondaga County Public Library, and to the Martin Luther King, Jr., Library at Syracuse University. Primary sources included:
 - a. manuscripts. Some of these were diaries, letters, and memoirs found within Oswego County, both at the Oswego County Historical Society and in private hands. Others came from the Gerrit Smith Papers at Syracuse University, or the Thurlow Weed Papers and the William Henry Seward Papers at the University of Rochester.
 - b. newspapers. Oswego City newspapers (indexed by Special Collections, Penfield Library, SUNY Oswego) yielded much information, including direct testimony about underground railroad activities, as well as much material about abolitionism and African American life. Obituaries were often useful. The Friend of Man, published by the New York State Anti-slavery Society from 1836-42, contained minutes of county and state anti-slavery meetings. Spot checks of the National Anti-Slavery Standard, the Colored American, and the True Wesleyan were also helpful.
 - c. Anti-slavery petitions. Extant petitions are now located in the National Archives. These were collected for Oswego County and made available through our research notebooks. These petitions do not give direct evidence of involvement with the freedom trail, but they do suggest commitment to abolitionism.
 - d. Grave markers. Several cemetery stones gave evidence of involvement with the freedom trail.

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- e. Site-related sources. These included physical evidence of buildings and properties, deeds, mortgages, assessments, maps, and city directories.

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C. Rating. A 1-5 point rating scale helps separate sites that can be reliably identified from those that need more research. Only sites that receive a "4" or a "5" should be considered well-documented enough for a National Register nomination.

1) Probably not involved. Local tradition may associate this site with the underground railroad, but there is no other evidence linking people and events connected with this site to abolitionism, African American life, or the freedom trail. In some cases, there is evidence to the contrary. In Oswego, Fort Ontario is a good example. Persistent local stories associate tunnels under the fort with the underground railroad, but no documentary evidence supports this as a hiding place for fugitive slaves. Common sense suggests that fugitives would, if possible, avoid a site associated with federal government and filled with U.S. soldiers.

2) Some possibility of involvement. An owner's name may have appeared on a list of people who attended a county anti-slavery convention or signed an anti-slavery petition, for example, but there is no documentary evidence for long-term, consistent involvement with abolitionism and no clear evidence of association with the underground railroad.

3) Quite possibly involved. Considerable evidence of owner's consistent, long-term commitment to abolitionism but no positive evidence of underground railroad involvement.

4) Almost certainly involved. Considerable documentary evidence of owners' or residents' abolitionist activity, and strong local association of the site (often carried through oral tradition) with the underground railroad. In the case of homes of fugitives, local association and oral tradition may have been lost. Census or cemetery records that list place of birth in a southern state or Canada strongly suggests that these African Americans were born in slavery.

5) Certainly involved. Strong local association of the person or site (often carried through oral tradition) with the underground railroad, combined with primary evidence—recorded by someone directly involved—that directly links the person or site with the underground railroad. A rating of "4" or "5" would merit nomination of a site to the National Register. A rating of less than "4" does not eliminate a site from potential eligibility for the National Register, but such sites require further investigation.

Using this 1-5 point scheme, we rated each site in Oswego County based on its documented involvement with underground railroad activities.

- e. Nominating. Based on our research and rating, combined with an assessment of integrity, we submitted preliminary inventory forms in 1998, prepared by Helen Breitbeck of the Heritage Foundation, to the New York State Division of Historic Preservation for fourteen

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of the best-documented sites. The multiple property nomination as submitted in 2000 includes ten sites from Oswego County and one site from Onondaga County.

Properties reflect three major themes in central New York from 1830-1861: the Freedom Trail, abolitionism, and African American communities. Historical importance rather than architectural significance determines the choice of sites to be nominated. The Freedom Trail, abolitionism, and African American community life emerge as three main themes in the chronological historic context statement. This statement focuses on the period from 1827 to 1861 when the Freedom Trail was most active. It also presents a background before 1827 (when New York was itself a slave state), as well as some consideration of the Freedom Trail legacy after 1861. While similar patterns may fit other parts of New York State, this project focuses on central New York as a main Freedom Trail corridor.

Integrity for these properties derives primarily from a knowledge of existing properties. Frequently, the best-documented and most important Freedom Trail properties have deteriorated or been changed from their historic appearance. Often, however, they retain their location, form, setting, feeling, and association. When original materials and workmanship remain but are buried (under new siding, for example), we have emphasized reversibility as a factor. The best-preserved properties form a guideline for those properties in need of preservation or restoration.

Because of time and budgetary constraints, we have submitted only a few of the many possible sites. Nominated properties reflect a variety of well-documented sites. They include eight houses operated by whites as way stations, two houses owned by African Americans who either were fugitives themselves or illustrated some aspect of Freedom Trail activity, and one building in which a fugitive operated a barbership. These sites suggest the types of evidence, standards of evaluation, and variety of issues that emerge in a study of this kind. Since this is an open-ended thematic nomination, we expect that many more sites will be submitted from throughout the region.